

The Power of Mercy
The Monroe Congregational Church
Rev. Jennifer M Gingras
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1 Kings 12:1-17, 25-29; Mark 10:42-45

When I was in my early twenties, I spent many weeks each summer as a volunteer counselor at Silver Lake Conference Center (our denomination's church camp).

For some reason, the Director at that time, Alden Tyrol, liked to place me with the middle school groups that were a little hard to handle. Inevitably, I'd be assigned a cabin with preteen girls with all kinds of behavioral health issues – from ADHD to Autism to eating disorders and generalized anxiety.

The camp wouldn't always know how to handle these girls, and since I had a track record of being able to work with the more challenging campers I think that they looking for me to come in and straighten them out.

I had a method for when I'd be put in this kind of situation, which was to go in and set up really strict expectations. Bedtime and lights out in the cabin were an absolute – no negotiation. I monitored their consumption of glasses of water at dinner, because I knew what effect dehydration would have on them. I expected them to participate in whatever program we had going on.

Middle schoolers can be rough, you've got to go into a situation like that with an iron fist, right? It's easier to go in really strong and then back off a little once they've proven they can get with the program. If you try using a soft and gentle approach right from the beginning, they may not take you seriously. Being too lenient meant that I'd probably have to go in and add rules later in the week, which would be harder because they'd resist it more. Before you know it, they'd figure out how to sneak away or pull pranks on me and all kinds of chaos could break loose!

So I started off each week with a really high standard for my campers, with lots of rules and expectations. I ruled those girls with an iron fist. Put a schedule on my door, so they knew what they could expect. My cabin was always prompt. They learned some camp songs that we'd sing on the way from one place to another. I became kind of like a drill sergeant.

And it worked! My methods were really effective. So many of the other cabins were all over the place, their counselors were only growing more frustrated as the week dragged on.

But my cabin was doing what they needed to be doing, they were getting down the hill to the waterfront and over to the arts & craft grotto on time. They were there in the social hall for meals when they needed to be, everything was working like clockwork. Parents would call the director when their kids came home and ask about that counselor they kept talking about, the one that everyone responded to.

The only thing was, even though I was getting these great results and feeling good about myself as a leader, holding the standards up really high, what was happening in my heart was that I was becoming more and more cold to these kids and their needs. When they complained about something trivial, I'd say "*suck it up, buttercup*" When they acted out, I made them run a lap around the ballfield. I didn't trust them, and before too long I wasn't even sure I liked them.

And so one day, we're going back up the hill after swim time, and one of my girls asks me something about dinner later that evening. As counselors, we had this casual agreement amongst ourselves to not answer questions about future events. This was just to keep the group moving toward the goal. We thought that if we gave out too much future information, that when things changed it would be too much work to argue about it.

So when a camper asked a question, we'd often respond 'No FI' and it would mean 'no future information'. So she asks me this question, it's a pretty standard one, and I respond "*No FI, Go on, keep moving.*"

Suddenly, this twelve year old girl just kind of pauses and stops. She collects herself for a moment, and she looks me straight in the eyes and says "*Why do you have to talk to me like that? Yea, I know that's what you always say, and I get it, but why do you have to talk to me like that?*"

Of course, I immediately wanted to respond. And the response that was going to come out of my mouth was defensive. And I got the first two words out, and I paused. Something hit me. What she said to me started to get down to the core of my being, and I realized I had to wait and think a little bit more about how I was going to respond.

And so I told her something like *"Hey look, I need to think about that for a minute, let's talk about this more when we get up to the Cedars."* And so we made our way up the cabin, and I ended up sitting with it through dinner.

Later that night, during our evening program, when we all got together around a campfire, I pulled her aside for a minute and I apologized. I said something like,

"Look, I'm really sorry. You were right. I shouldn't have talked to you like that. And I'm so proud of you for doing what even an adult would struggle to do. To be able to call me out for my tone, and to be able to do it in a way that I would hear it. There wasn't any anger, like, I could tell that you were hurt, but you were able to talk to me. Good job."

And later that evening, after I spoke with her, we were all sitting around the fire and I ended up apologizing to the whole group, and I was just like

"Hey everybody, I'm not sure if you saw what happened earlier on the hill, but I'm sorry. I came in with this belief that I've got to come in with an iron fist and we've got to do things this way, and I'm just so sorry. I haven't been thinking about you, I've just been thinking about how do I accomplish all we have going on this week and I've been treating you like you are objects in the way, and for that I'm so, so sorry."

And as we talked that night, something in the group dynamic changed. And, something inside me had changed. And we started to work together toward common goals. We decided what we would work towards, and it was an incredible experience.

It was just a few years later that I became a dean, so I was tasked with training counselors to do the kind of work that I had done. And I watched person after person come in and try to lead their cabin with the mindset of a drill sergeant: *I'm going to get this group to do what I need it to do and I'm going to come in with an iron fist.*

And what I noticed is, it worked. For a little while. But after a few days, it stopped working. And the group would go into a greater chaos than when they first arrived. And it was in those moments that I loved to pull aside one of the counselors and share this story. Because they all wanted to know how I got where I was and how I got my group to do the things they got done.

I had to tell them – it was never those first days of being the heavy and acting like a drill sergeant, that's not what made these kids come around.

It was the moment of vulnerability when they were able to see an adult come down to their level and admit they messed up. That made all the difference in our world. And I'm certain, all these years later, that lesson has impacted my role as a teacher, a pastor, a youth advisor, and a mother.

For me, that moment on the hill was a gift. A child had the strength to call me out with calmness. I may never have learned that leadership lesson on my own. I would have never gotten there. It was such a blessing to get that feedback in the way that I could hear it. Because then I could share it with people all kinds of people in my life who have approached a similar situation with this idea of *"well, we're just going to make them behave and we're going to make it work our way."*

Well, in the narrative lectionary reading for this week we hear about Jeroboam and Rehoboam. Rehoboam was the King, right after Solomon, he was Solomon's son. After he took over the first thing he did was to meet with his father's advisors to ask them *"what do I need to do?"* And the elders told him: *"Your father has been really harsh on the Israelites. Don't repeat that pattern. Come in and ease the pressure up a little and these people will be loyal to you forever."*

Then Rehoboam went to the other side of town and found his friends that he had grown up with and he asked them the same question *"What should I do? What kind of leader should I be?"* They responded, with all the bravado of intoxicated frat boys, *"You need to come in with an iron fist! Let them know that you're way stronger than your father. They thought he was tough, just wait until they get a load of you!"*

In the end, the inexperienced king didn't listen to the age-old wisdom, instead, he listened to the bravado because it stoked his ego. And he came in to rule with an iron fist. And when he came in with that iron fist, it split the kingdom and Jeroboam took over half the kingdom and ruled in a different place. The Kingdom was divided.

Our culture tells us that the way you gain control is you rule with strength and might – with an iron fist. But the kingdom of God doesn't work under the same methods and models that we do. The Kingdom of God is upside down and backwards and when we follow the values of love and mercy, it's miraculous what can happen.

So, if you lead anyone, I want you to try, however scary it may be, to live into the kingdom values. To back off the control. To back off the power. And just see how that goes. Amen.